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Claudia Li: Despite tradition, it's time we took shark fin soup off the menu

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By Claudia Li, August 16, 2010

I've never seen *Jaws*, but headlines of shark attacks in popular media were enough to convince me that sharks were mindless, evil animals that attack without mercy. It wasn't until I watched *Sharkwater* last year that I realized how mistaken I was and how much responsibility I had as a Chinese Canadian to promote awareness about this important, misunderstood animal.



Wedding banquets don't have to serve up a cruel tradition, Claudia Li writes.

On average, less than four people worldwide die from shark attacks. You are more likely to get killed by a falling vending machine. Even if sharks were as dangerous as we've brainwashed ourselves to believe, does that mean they don't deserve our protection? Elephants and tigers kill over 100 people each year. The bottom line is that we need to protect all animals to conserve biodiversity, regardless of their fluffiness or the sharpness of their teeth.

The Discovery Channel launched its Shark Week earlier this month. The annual television series showcases sharks—more than anything, however, it focuses on shark attacks. The programs paint the animals as ruthless death machines, designed to "seek and destroy". Entertainment is great, but here's the thing: sharks are being threatened with extinction. Continuing to demonize these animals is something we can no longer afford to do.

Sharks are ancient creatures that have roamed the Earth for over 400 million years and are under serious threat from overfishing. There are over 450 species of sharks, only a handful of which have been known to be aggressive (those species include the bull shark, the tiger shark, and, of course, the infamous great white). The largest fish in the world is a whale shark—it has no teeth and feeds primarily on plankton. The second largest fish in the world is the basking shark. It, too, filter feeds on plankton and was once abundant along the west coast of B.C.

As top predators also known as apex predators, sharks play an integral role in the



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ocean, which makes up over half of the world's surface and provides more than half of our clean oxygen. They maintain the balance in the ocean on which our survival so grossly depends. Sharks have adapted to survive this long but now one-half of oceanic sharks are now being pushed to an elevated risk of extinction. The main cause for their populations' decline? Shark fin soup.

A median of 38 million sharks are killed each year for shark fin soup. The soup is a staple of Chinese fine dining but its preparation has spawned an entire industry. The shark finning industry is inherently wasteful and inhumane. The fins make up an average of less than 10 percent of the shark's total body weight. Thus, to maximize shark fin harvesting, sharks are often finned at sea and their bodies dumped back into the ocean—leaving the animal to suffer and bleed to death.

The challenge in phasing out this dish lies in its role as a centuries-old Chinese tradition. Shark fin soup is a delicacy in Chinese cuisine that is part of what is known as the "Big Four" dishes. They include shark fin, abalone, fish maw (the swim bladder of a fish), and sea cucumber. Shark fin is particularly important as it represents a symbol of status and face. Most popularly served at wedding banquets as part of the set menu, we used to say that a bride marrying into a family without shark fin soup on the table is marrying into a poor family. We know now that this is purely folklore and that shark fin soup is an ecologically destructive, cruel tradition—a tradition we can no longer keep.

A future void of sharks is becoming incredibly real, but consumers have the power to take a stand—not only for sharks but also for our community. Next time you hear that a friend or family member is going to serve shark fin, ask them if they know how it arrived on their table. Tell them that they have the opportunity to send a powerful, positive message with one simple change. It starts by taking shark fin soup off the menu.

Claudia Li is the founder of [Shark Truth](#), a nonprofit group dedicated to promoting awareness around shark fin soup from within the Chinese community.

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Petey J

Mon, 2010-08-16 20:37

now how about bear bladders & balls ?
Bear bile does nothing for you. You're eating bear puke !!!!

David L.

Tue, 2010-08-17 07:11

At last a start towards stopping the silly habit of eating obscure and dare I say weird things.
She is absolutely right ! (so is Petey J)

Truman Peyote

Tue, 2010-08-17 10:18

While I'm sure there will be some who feel this is an attack on a cultural tradition, nothing could be further from the truth. Just as we have come to realize that force feeding geese to fatten their livers for the sake of an hors d'oeuvre, or confining a calf to make veil are cruel and inhumane, we must now realize that cutting off the fins of sharks is equally wrong. Even leaving aside the cruelty aspect, we must also recognize the very real threat our oceans are now facing. Overfishing, pollution, and global warming have all put a strain on the world's ocean environments. At the rate we are proceeding, I wouldn't be at all surprised to read that our oceans were themselves dying before this century is out. If that happens, life on this planet will come to an inglorious end. We need our oceans, far more than they need us. In fact, I'm sure they'd be better off WITHOUT us.

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Jackie Larkin

Tue, 2010-08-17
10:53

Great, concise article. Informative and punchy. Thanks for the passion and the good writing! Time to fall in love with sharks.

AgreeToDisagree

Tue, 2010-08-17
23:16

Notwithstanding pain or suffering caused to the fish :-

Aside from limiting the catch in the same way for whales, and until a biotech method of growing sharks fins in petri dishes is found, governments could require fishermen to at least attach plastic fins (or a durable organic alternative) to the de-finned shark and seal it with bio-assimilative glue for a start.

This method would only work with adult sharks only, but at least could ensure populations could continue breeding and are not lost from inevitable deaths from being unable to swim.

Nick Dulvy

Wed, 2010-08-18
15:45

Shark finning is a key cause of biodiversity loss; one third of the world's fins are taken from open-ocean surface-dwelling sharks and rays, caught as a byproduct of tuna and swordfish fisheries. 16 out of the 21 oceanic pelagic sharks and rays are listed as Threatened or Near Threatened by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Red List.

Ky Co

Sun, 2011-01-30
16:28

There are imitation shark fin that are used to make soup and tastes really good. May be it would help reduce shark finning if these imitation shark fins were promoted more and made available everywhere just like imitation crab legs. Would you pay \$30 for a bowl of soup that tastes the same as one for \$3? Unfortunately, I only know of the Richmond night market where imitation shark fin soup is available.

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